

## U.S. Intervention in Latin America



Main business street, Domingo City, San Domingo, c. 1901. The Dominican Republic was another site of U.S. intervention in the early 1900s.

### Teddy's Legacy

[Time line](#) of U.S. intervention in Latin America

The Monroe Doctrine:

[Text](#) (plus some background information)

[Brief analysis](#) of doctrine  
[Roosevelt Corollary](#)

Between the end of the Spanish-American War and the dawn of the Great Depression, the United States sent troops to Latin American countries thirty-two times. It used the Roosevelt Corollary, or addition, to the Monroe Doctrine to justify intervention. In the corollary, Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed that the United States, because it was a "civilized nation," had the right to stop "chronic wrongdoing" throughout the Western Hemisphere.

"Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship," he said. "Chronic wrongdoing, however, . . . may force the United States to exercise an international police power." Teddy didn't hesitate to use this "police power" to strengthen his country, but he was always careful not to upset the balance of world power.

Maps of Nicaragua:

[Large map](#)

[Smaller map](#) of Nicaragua with geographical facts

Another [map](#)



"Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt

More about [William Walker](#), including a picture

[Foreign Intervention in Nicaragua, 1850-68](#) (Library of Congress) ([Index](#))

More about [Adolfo Diaz](#).

General information about Nicaragua:  
[Nicaragua Profile](#) (Library of Congress)

[Background Notes: Nicaragua](#)

William Howard Taft, former governor of the Philippines, followed Roosevelt into the White House. Taft believed in economic expansion, and he introduced a policy called "dollar diplomacy." This policy used diplomacy to advance and protect American businesses in other countries. Taft employed Roosevelt's corollary in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries to protect American investments.

American businesses had been active in Nicaragua since the 1850s. The lush country attracted American fruit growers and mining companies. Others believed that Nicaragua offered the best site for a canal, and they invested in land. Cornelius Vanderbilt started a company that transported passengers between New York and San Francisco via the Nicaraguan jungle. Shortly after Commodore Perry opened Japan, Vanderbilt plotted to take control of Nicaragua.

With Vanderbilt's help, a young adventurer named William Walker set out with fifty-seven followers to conquer Nicaragua. A short, freckled man with sharp green eyes, Walker formed an alliance with a group of local rebels and defeated the Nicaraguan forces. He proclaimed himself "commander in chief," and soon thousands of Americans rushed into the country. Many Americans wanted the United States to assume direct control of Nicaragua. The government, however, was afraid to upset the fragile balance between "free" and "slave" territories.

Walker eventually quarreled with Vanderbilt about the transit company, and soon another revolution drove him from power. In 1860 Walker died before a firing squad. American economic involvement in Nicaragua lived on.

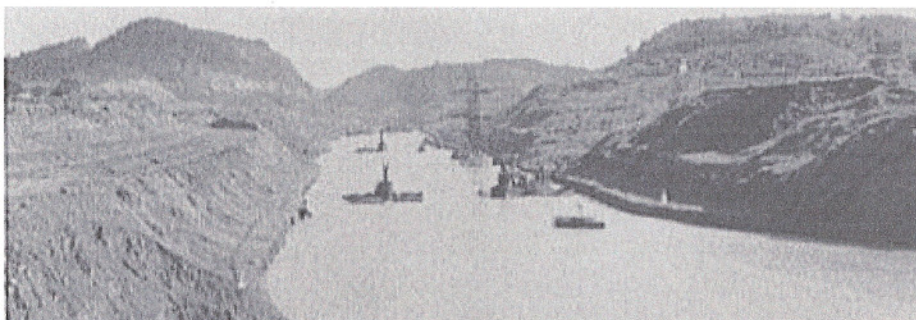
Nicaraguans confidently expected the canal, and they gladly accepted loans and payments based on its eventual construction. By 1909 the United States-Nicaraguan Concession was largest American company in Nicaragua. That year the Concession's chief legal counsel, Philander C. Knox, resigned to become Taft's Secretary of State. When Nicaragua's ruler cancelled an agreement with one American business and threatened the Concession, the company organized another revolution. Adolfo Diaz, a Concession employee, became the new president. Taft quickly recognized the Diaz government.

When still another revolt threatened Diaz, Taft invoked the corollary and ordered American marines to suppress the rebellion. Then he and Knox worked out a plan to collect the money that Nicaragua owed to foreign investors. Under the plan, American banks took control of Nicaragua's customs collection. They applied the money they collected directly to the country's debt. The marines remained in Nicaragua's capital to serve as "international police" and prevent any further revolts. Except for a short period in 1925, they stayed for 21 years.

### **The End of an Era**

The two decades that sandwiched the turning of the century enclosed a turning point in American history. Despite George Washington's advice to the contrary, the years saw American interests scatter across the globe. America had flexed its muscles, and the world had cowered. But the ease with which America gained its new possessions obscured the responsibilities that came with them. Dollar diplomacy would soon drag a reluctant America into the muddy trenches of the Western Front. The "Open Door" welcomed a series of squabbles that later erupted in a mushroom cloud. But few in that innocent era could foresee such extraordinary events. Most believed that America was simply following its natural order, its destiny.

# The Panama Canal



Panama Canal:  
Culebra Cut,  
c. 1910-1920



Download a movie of [President McKinley](#)

Teddy Roosevelt's [Inaugural Address](#)

Map of Panama:

[Access to information and maps about Panama](#)

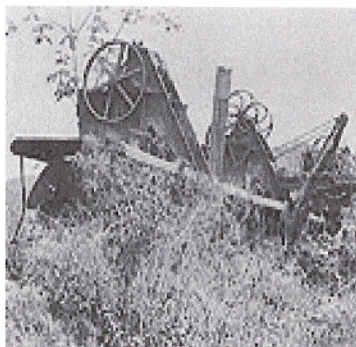
[Large relief map](#)

## President Roosevelt

The popular acclaim that carried Teddy Roosevelt to the governorship of New York didn't stop there. In 1900, Republicans nominated Teddy as President McKinley's running mate. McKinley won a second term, and Teddy was sworn in as vice-president. Six months later, an assassin's bullet killed McKinley. At age 42, Theodore Roosevelt became the nation's youngest president.

Roosevelt assumed the office with the same vigor with which he charged up Kettle Hill. A long believer in Captain Mahan's theory of sea power, Roosevelt began to revitalize the navy. Now that America's empire stretched from the Caribbean across the Pacific, the old idea of a canal between the two oceans took on new urgency. Mahan had predicted that "the canal will become a strategic center of the most vital importance," and Teddy agreed.

"The canal," Roosevelt said, "was by far the most important action I took in foreign affairs during the time I was President. When nobody could or would exercise efficient authority, I exercised it."



Abandoned French machinery  
in Panama, c. 1910-1914

## Joining the Waters

In 1878 Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French engineer who built the Suez Canal, began to dig a canal across the Isthmus of Panama, which was then part of Colombia. Tropical disease and engineering problems halted construction on the canal, but a French business (the New Panama Canal Company) still held the rights to the project. Roosevelt agreed to pay \$40 million for the rights, and he began to negotiate with Colombia for control of the land. He offered \$10 million for a fifty-mile strip across the isthmus. Colombia refused.

"We were dealing with a government of irresponsible bandits,"

Biographical info about [Osmund Osmundsen](#), a Norwegian immigrant who worked as a ship rigger during the building of the canal. Includes historical photos



Steam shovels digging the Panama Canal

Smithsonian Institution's ["Make the Dirt Fly"](#) Panama Canal exhibition

[TR Papers](#) at the Library of Congress

Roosevelt stormed. "I was prepared to . . . at once occupy the Isthmus anyhow, and proceed to dig the canal. But I deemed it likely that there would be a revolution in Panama soon."

Teddy was right. The chief engineer of the New Panama Canal Company organized a local revolt. Roosevelt immediately sent the battleship *Nashville* and a detachment of marines to Panama to support the new government. The rebels gladly accepted Roosevelt's \$10 million offer, and they gave the United States complete control of a ten-mile wide canal zone.

Roosevelt ordered army engineers to start digging. Thousands of workers sweated in the malarial heat. They tore up jungles and cut down mountains. Insects thrived in muddy, stagnant pools. "Mosquitoes get so thick you get a mouthful with every breath," a worker complained. The mosquitoes also carried yellow fever, and many fell victim to the deadly disease before Dr. William Gorgas found a way to stop it.

Some Americans did not approve of Roosevelt's behavior. "There was much accusation about my having acted in an 'unconstitutional' manner," Teddy shrugged. "I took the isthmus, started the canal, and then left Congress -- not to debate the canal, but to debate me. . . . While the debate goes on, the canal does too; and they are welcome to debate me as long as they wish, provided that we can go on with the canal."

Work did go on. Despite lethal landslides, workers with dynamite and clumsy steam shovels cut their way across a continent. They built a railroad, three sets of concrete locks, and a huge artificial lake. Nine years later the freighter *Ancon* entered the new channel. Hundreds of construction workers hopped aboard for the historic ride. A shiny towing locomotive pulled the *Ancon* into the first lock. Bands played and crowds cheered as the ship slipped into the Pacific.

Roosevelt liked to repeat an old African saying: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick. You will go far." In Panama, Teddy proved to the world that he was willing to use his big navy as a stick to further American interests.